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ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that all speech communities have varieties of simplified speech regarded as appropriate for use with individuals who do not have a full command of a language. These simplified codes are conventionalized within speech communities and are learned by the same process of cultural transmission as other language behaviors. This discussion focuses on the characteristics of simplified codes directed at non-native speakers of the target language, traits that trigger the use of these codes, and issues related to them. The discussion looks at simplified codes as they are used in the classroom (teacher talk), and the possible effects of these codes on English language teaching. (27 references) (JL)

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Foreigner Talk, Foreigner Register, and Teacher Talk

S. Kathleen Kitao

Ferguson (1971) has suggested that all speech communities have varieties of simplified speech regarded as appropriate for use when hearers do not have a full command of the language. These include baby talk, ways of talking to people who are hard of hearing, and ways of speaking to non native speakers of the language judged deficient in language proficiency. Simplified codes are, in general, conventionalized within speech communities and are learned by the same process of cultural transmission as other language behaviors (Corder, 1975), though teachers may be made conscious of their simplification strategies through their training and/or extensive experience in communicating with non native speakers. The fact that these codes show this systematic patterning within speech communities allows us to view them as a subsystem or "register" of the language (Henzl, 1973).

In this paper, I will discuss characteristics of simplified codes directed at non native speakers (NNSs) of the target language, traits that trigger the use of these codes, and issues related to them. I will also discuss simplified codes as they are used in the language classroom (teacher talk) and finally possible effects of simplified codes on English language teaching.

Foreigner Talk

The term *foreigner talk* (FT) was first used by Ferguson (1971) to describe speech used with foreigners perceived to be deficient in proficiency in the target language.

Ferguson speculated that FT was a representation of the way native speakers (NSs) thought non-native speakers spoke, since FT closely resembles the language elicited when NSs are asked to imitate foreigners (Ferguson, 1975). In fact, in English, secondary uses of FT include reporting the speech of foreigners (Ferguson, 1981). Also, in German and in Dutch, correlations have been found between the errors made in NNSs' speech and the errors used in the FT of their NS partners (Meisel, 1977; Snow, van Eeden and Muysken, 1981).

Characteristics of foreigner talk

Linguistic characteristics. Some characteristics of FT in English that Ferguson (1975) described included the absence of the copula (be verb); the absence of certain morphological markers (e.g., possessives, past tense, and 3rd person -s); and the presence of words that do not usually appear in English spoken to other NSs (e.g., *savvy* used as a verb and *heap* [meaning much or very]). Other characteristics include the use of full forms instead of contractions; the use of short sentences; the repetition of words; the selection of one all purpose form (e.g., *me* used for *I, me, mine,* and *my* in English or infinitive for all non-past verb forms in Italian); and the use of feedback devices, such as tag questions (Ferguson and DeBose, 1977). These linguistic features generally include the most stereotypical features of the language of NNSs known to the community of NSs (Valdman, 1981). FT

often differs from what is acceptable in standard language, as the characteristics listed by Ferguson and DeBose would indicate.

Non-linguistic characteristics. Some non-linguistic features of FT have also been described. They include speaking slowly; enunciating words carefully; increased volume, especially for important content words; and use of exaggerated gestures (Ramamurti, 1980). While these strategies can be helpful, they may have the unintended effect of making comprehension more difficult. As Hammerly (1982) pointed out, these features may have the effect of distorting speech, making it more difficult to understand.

FT and Pidgins

Ferguson (1971) posited that FT contributed to the development of pidgins, since it prevented NNSs from hearing well formed, standard language. Comprehensible language is necessary for acquiring a target language (Krashen, 1982). If the comprehensible language that the NNS hears consists of non-standard language, it is non-standard language that is repeatedly reinforced and therefore acquired.

FT and NS/NSS Relations

Ferguson believed that FT was intended to derogate the person it was addressed to. Valdman (1981) agreed and suggested that NSs also use FT to maintain social distance from NNSs considered socially inferior or subservient. The NS recognizes his/her native language as an emblem of membership in the society and symbolically protects it from the outsider. In this way, the NS exerts control over the target language by presenting the NNS with an impoverished variety of it. This denial of the opportunity to assimilate has the effect of reducing

the foreign learner's motivation and fossilizing the foreigner's language at a highly deviant stage.

Foreigner Register

In contrast to FT, there is a second variety of language for speaking to NNSs. This variety is called *foreigner register* (FR), a term coined by Arthur, Weiner, Culver, Lee, and Thomas (1979). FR was defined as a simplified register which follows the rules of the standard language, used by NSs in speaking to NNSs. The main difference between FT and FR is that FR follows the rules of the standard language while FT does not.

Characteristics of FR

Characteristics of FR that have been identified include use of high frequency vocabulary, simplified grammatical structure, and the avoidance of idioms (Gass and Varonis, 1985). In addition, FR has a higher percentage of yes/no questions (e.g., Are you going to class?) and or/choice questions (e.g., Are you going to class or to the cafeteria?) than wh- questions (e.g., Where are you going?) (Long, 1981). (Native speaker register [NSR], used by NSs to speak with other NSs, has more wh- questions than yes/no questions.)

Long and Sato (1983) also identified some rhetorical characteristics of FT. These include such devices as repetition, rephrasing, various forms of discourse repair, and comprehension checks.

Foreigner Talk, Foreigner Register, and Native Speaker Register

While FT can generally be distinguished from FR or NSR by its

pidgin-like characteristics, the differences between FR and NSR are, in many cases, quantitative rather than qualitative. Therefore, the distinctions between FR and NSR are not always clear and precise. There is extensive overlap between syntactic forms that are used in FR and those used in NSR. The same structure may occur in both registers. For example, wh- questions and yes/no questions appear in both FR and NSR; the difference is in the percentage of each (Long, 1981). This fact has sometimes made it difficult to distinguish FR from NSR.

Not all researchers make the distinction between FR and FT. Some (Henzl, 1979; Tarone, 1980) consider both to be part of the same phenomenon. However, the distinction appears to be useful and will be employed in this paper. Also, these terms are not universally used to refer to this distinction. For example, Long (1981) uses the term *grammatical foreigner talk* when he refers to what Arthur, Weiner, Culver, Lee, and Thomas (1979) designated as FR.

Issues Related to FT and FR

Strategies in FT and FR

It has been hypothesized that an NNS's linguistic insufficiency triggers FT or FR (Freed, 1981), or more accurately, the NS's perception of the NNS's linguistic insufficiency (Gass and Varonis, 1985; Schinke-Llano, 1983). Gass and Varonis speculated that in listening to and interacting with the NNS, the NS forms an impression about whether the NNS can understand NSR. If the NS forms the impression that the NNS will not understand NSR, he/she may use FT or FR to make messages easier for the NNS to understand (Ferguson, 1971), i.e., to lighten the NNS's interactional burden.

This effort to lighten the interactional burden can take several forms (Long, 1981). One of the most obvious strategies is that of simplifying grammatical structures. This notion of simplifying can be nebulous, however, since it is not always easy to determine whether one grammatical structure is "simpler" than another (Ferguson and DeBose, 1977). Strategies for simplification include omitting material (e.g., copulas and articles); reducing irregularity; and using short, simple sentences rather than longer ones with relative or subordinate clauses (e.g., "His aunt came to visit him. She lives in California," rather than, "His aunt, who lives in California, came to visit him.").

NSs may also simplify the lexicon and use high frequency words and words likely to be within the vocabulary range of the NNS. However, as will be discussed in more detail in the section on teacher talk, this may have the consequence of making the meaning less accurate and specific.

Yes/no questions and or/choice questions are more frequent in FT and FR than in NSR, because it is considered easier for the NNS to respond with a "yes" or "no" or to repeat one of the choices given in the question rather than to respond with completely new information (Long and Sato, 1983).

Other strategies involve not so much simplifying as clarifying the message (Ferguson and DeBose, 1977). This may involve adding redundancy to the message, supplying material that is normally omitted (e.g., "You close the door," rather than "Close the door.") and using full forms instead of contractions or reductions.

NSs may also use different strategies for certain functions when speaking to a NNS. For example, questions have a higher frequency as topic initiating moves in FT or FR than in NSR. Long (1981)

found that 96% of topic-initiating moves were in the form of questions in NS-NNS interaction but only 62% in NS-NS interaction. Long speculated on several reasons for this. Questions lead naturally to answers, while the expected response to a statement may not be so obvious. Questions encourage, perhaps even compel, the NNS to participate in the conversation, since in most cultures, questions require answers (Long and Sato, 1983). In addition, linguistic markers associated with questions (e.g., subject-auxiliary inversion and rising intonation) can be used to signal to the NNS that a speaking turn is approaching. Questions encode at least part of the expected response and therefore make responding easier, because they only require confirmation or denial of the already encoded proposition. It also seems to be easier for the NNS to understand what kind of response is expected to a question than to a statement.

Triggers of FT and FR

Non-native speaker traits. NNS traits that have been posited to trigger FR or FT include pronunciation, grammatical proficiency, vocabulary, fluency (ability to speak smoothly, without unnecessary pauses), demonstration of lack of comprehension, and an interaction among these. One or all of these traits help the NS form an impression of the NNS's level of proficiency and influence his/her use of FT or FR (Gass and Varonis, 1985).

NNSs obviously vary widely in their ability to pronounce English, and pronunciation may be taken as an indication of overall proficiency. If the NNS's production is not fluent, i.e., if the rate of speaking is slow or if the speech is punctuated by long or inappropriate pauses, this is interpreted as indicating time required to process the

grammatical structures or to search for a lexical item (Butterworth, 1975). The NNS's grammatical and lexical proficiency in speaking may be taken as an indication of the level of proficiency at which he /she can comprehend the language. If the NNS demonstrates a lack of comprehension, the NS may respond by switching from NSR to FR or FT, recognizing an initial overestimation of the NNS's proficiency.

Native speaker traits. NS traits may also affect the use of FR or FT. However, while numerous studies look at the effects that NNS traits have on use of FT or FR, none have systematically looked at the traits of the NS. One possible factor is familiarity with non-native speech (Gass and Varonis, 1985). While Gass and Varonis do not try to explain this relationship, one possible explanation is that familiarity with non native speech may make the NS more familiar with possible simplification strategies, which he/she may put to use in FR or FT. Another explanation is that the NS assumes that the NNS can comprehend what he/she can produce, and bases FR or FT on utterances that NNSs produce.

Another possible variable is experience dealing with NNSs (Hatch, Shapira, and Gough, 1978). Presumably, a person who has had experience interacting with NNSs will be more sensitive to the areas in which they may have difficulties. As a result of practice and experience, perhaps through trial and error, they may have well developed simplification and clarification strategies for dealing with those difficulties.

Another influence on the choice to use FT or FR may be experience speaking a foreign language with native speakers of that language. A person who has had the experience of being the object of FR or FT in another language may be aware of simplification or clar-

ification strategies and their usefulness in facilitating communication. Hatch, Shapira and Gough (1978) mentioned this as a possible influence, though they did not feel that experience speaking a foreign language with native speakers was a sufficient explanation. In their study, FT was demonstrated both by a subject who had no experience with language study and by one who had extensive experience. (However, this part of their study included only two speakers.)

It is not clear what triggers FT rather than FR, assuming that this distinction is meaningful. Among the traits that have been suggested to influence the choice to use of FT or FR are ethnocentricity (belief in the superiority of one's own ethnic group) and prejudice (an adverse opinion about a certain group, formed without direct knowledge) against foreigners or against persons of a particular nationality (Valdman, 1981). As mentioned above, Ferguson (1971) and Valdman (1981) have suggested FT indicates a desire to maintain distance from foreigners, to indicate to them that their assimilation in the target culture is not desirable. If this is true, then ethnocentric NSs and NSs who are prejudiced against foreigners would be more inclined to use FT.

Teacher Talk

The FT or FR addressed to students in the classroom perceived to be of limited language proficiency is referred to as *teacher talk* (TT). More specifically, TT is defined as "anything that the teacher says spontaneously, without a script, the actual linguistic content of which is created to suit a particular need" (Frey, 1988). It includes the language used in the classroom for giving directions, explaining, correcting, reacting, reinforcing, and asking questions.

Like both FT and FR, TT is influenced by the linguistic inequality between the speaker and hearer. In addition, however, it is influenced by typical features of classroom interaction, particularly by the inequality of status between teacher and student (Henzl, 1973).

Characteristics of TT

Linguistic and non-linguistic characteristics. Studies of the characteristics of TT have isolated characteristics similar to FR, including high frequency lexical items, simplified syntax, clear enunciation, and numerous pauses (Henzl, 1973). In addition, teacher talk tends to focus on the "here and now." Long and Sato (1983) found significantly more instances of present temporal reference than non-present temporal reference.

Questions in teacher talk. Long and Sato (1983) looked at questions as they are used in TT. They compared questions asked by teachers in ESL classes and questions asked by NSs in casual conversation with NNSs. Their results indicated that ESL teachers used significantly more display questions (questions intended to establish the addressee's knowledge) than referential questions (questions intended to provide contextual information about situations, events, actions, purposes, relationships, or properties). In contrast, the results indicated that display questions were almost unknown in casual conversation between NSs and NNSs, and referential questions were common. In addition, questions in general were less commonly used by teachers in the classroom than by NSs in casual conversation.

Inaccuracy and Lack of Clarity in TT

Teachers should be aware that simplification may be at the ex-

pense of specificity and accuracy (Chaudron, 1983). Chaudron compared lectures given to native English speakers in Canada with lectures on the same topics given to NNSs. He found that the higher frequency words used in the lectures to NNSs often resulted in a lack of clarity or accuracy. For example, "funny" was substituted for "ironic" and "feeling" for "myth," making the intended meaning of the lecture for the NNSs less clear and specific.

Students' Reaction to TT

Lynch (1988) compared students' reactions to two video tapes, one made of a teacher telling a story to NSs of English and another of the teacher telling the same story to EFL students. The version for EFL students included comprehension checks, pauses, and alteration of idiomatic speech. EFL students who listened to this version reported that they felt that they were being "talked down to." These results indicate that EFL students may recognize TT and may feel that it denigrates them. Therefore, while teachers should realize that TT is often necessary for comprehension, it is important that they not use TT that is simplified more than necessary for comprehension.

Effects of Simplified Registers on Language Learners

The study of simplified registers, particularly foreigner talk, foreigner register, and teacher talk, has attracted the interest of language teachers and researchers in the area of language teaching. While simplified registers seem to be, for the most part, used unconsciously, it is useful for teachers to be more aware of their use of these registers and the effects that they may have on comprehension

and acquisition.

If acquisition of language is based on comprehensible input, as Krashen (1982) theorizes, the input that language learners receive will be likely to influence language acquisition (Long, 1985). This is a particularly important issue in EFL settings, where a high percentage of learners' input is in the form of TT. Even in a class not taught with the communicative approach advocated by Krashen, learners may acquire grammatical structures through the language that the teacher uses in class, including explanations, instructions, etc. (Littlebrown, 1986). While there is little actual research about the use of simplified language in the classroom, a number of points can be made about its potential effects in the classroom.

First, simplification helps make language comprehensible (Long, 1985). According to Krashen's theory, comprehensible input at a level slightly beyond the learner's level of proficiency is what makes acquisition possible. Therefore, simplification on the part of teachers and others who interact with learners helps provide the learners with comprehensible input, making language acquisition possible.

Second, if the strategies used for simplification result in non standard language (for example, deletion of the copula or articles or use of one all purpose form), it is non standard language that learners will acquire. Since this is obviously undesirable, ungrammatical simplified structures should be avoided.

Third, if language is simplified too much, it will be within the level of proficiency that learners have already acquired. Therefore, learners will not acquire new structures. In addition, if learners infer that the oversimplified TT is derogatory (whether or not it is intended to be), this is likely to raise a barrier between the teacher and the

learners.

Fourth, a characteristic of some TT is slower speech, careful enunciation, and clear pronunciation. If learners have little other input, they will be likely to become dependent on this slow, clear speech. They will not have the opportunity to become accustomed to the non-linguistic characteristics of NSR and will have great difficulty comprehending NSR if they encounter it.

Fifth, teachers should be aware of the possibility that using higher frequency words may cause a loss of accuracy, specificity, and clarity, as Chaudron (1983) pointed out. Teachers might consider using lower frequency words for which learners can guess the meaning from the context, particularly if this allows clearer, more accurate, and more specific expression.

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